

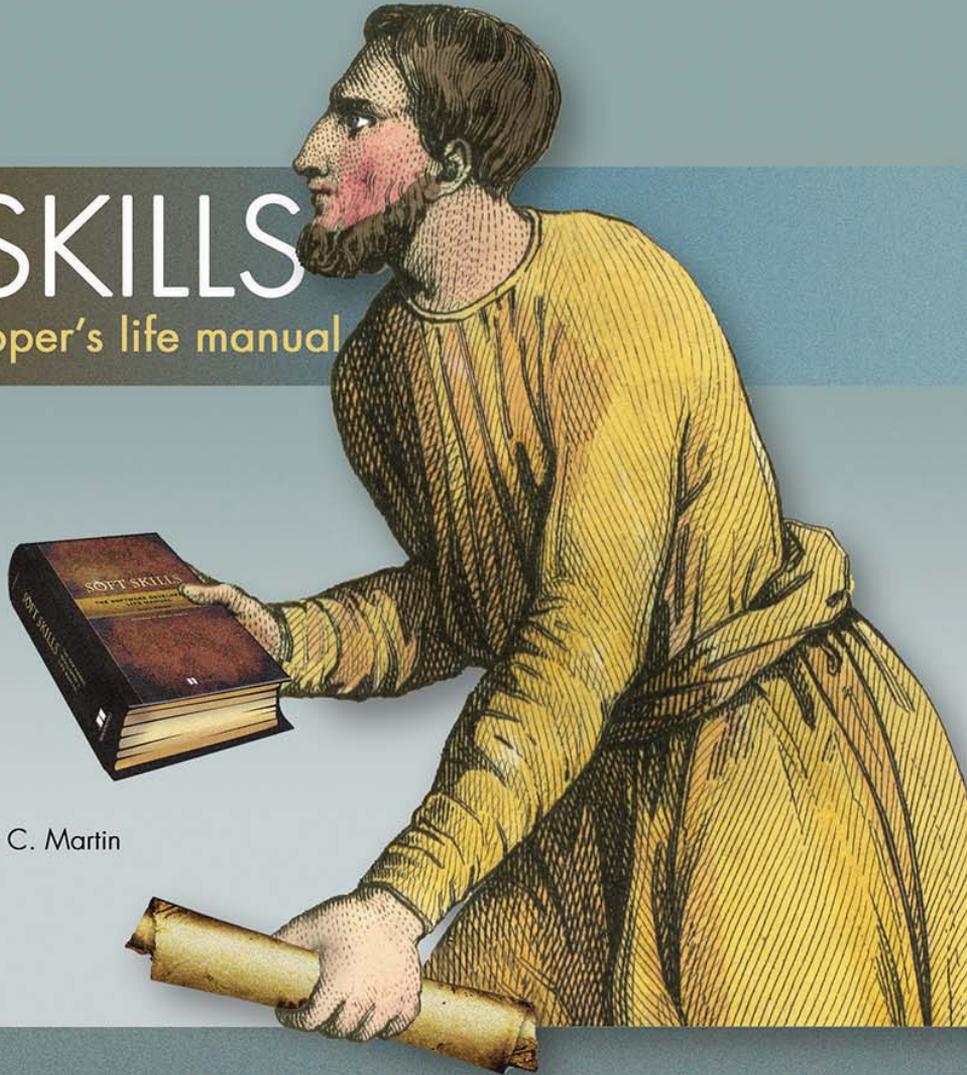
SAMPLE CHAPTER

SOFT SKILLS

The software developer's life manual

John Z. Sonmez

Forewords by
Scott Hanselman and Robert C. Martin





Soft Skills

by John Z. Sonmez

Chapter 26

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Don't be afraid to look like an idiot

If you really want to succeed at marketing yourself, you're going to have to learn to overcome one huge fear that most of us have—looking like an idiot.

It isn't easy to get up on stage and talk to a crowd of people. It isn't easy to write blog posts for the whole internet to see and comment on. It can be embarrassing to hear your voice on a podcast or to see your face on video. Even writing a book, to some degree, takes some guts—especially if you're putting all you've got into it.

But if you want to be successful at your efforts, you have to learn to stop caring about what people think. You have to learn how to not be afraid to look like an idiot.

Everything is uncomfortable at first

The first time I got up on a stage in front of people and had to deliver a presentation, I was sweating bullets. I was trying to hold my voice steady, but it kept cracking. I'd click a slide and my stuttering hand would click forward two slides instead of one. But do you know what happened? I got through it. I might not have done the best job. I probably didn't charm the audience with my charisma, but the time passed and eventually it was over.

The next time I got up on stage, I was still a mess, but I wasn't quite as nervous. My hands didn't shake so much. My shirt wasn't as soaked with sweat. And the next time was even easier than that. Now when I get up on

stage, I take the microphone and confidently stride across the room, and the energy in the room empowers me and makes me feel alive. I never thought I'd be saying that the first few times I ever gave a speech.

The truth of the matter is that things change. Over time the things that made you uncomfortable become second nature. You have to give it enough time and be willing to go through that awkwardness until it stops being awkward.

When you first do something that makes you feel uncomfortable, you can't imagine how you could ever feel comfortable doing that thing. You're tempted to think that it just isn't for you or that other people have natural talents in a particular area, but you don't. You have to learn to overcome this kind of thinking and realize that almost everyone goes through the same kind of uncomfortable feelings when they first do anything challenging — especially in front of a group of people.

I'll be honest with you, most people don't make it. They give up early. They care too much about what other people think about them and they don't push hard enough to get through the difficult, awkward part to something better. That's why if you follow the advice in this book, you'll succeed where others fail. Most developers won't be willing to do what you'll be willing to do. Most developers won't be willing to bear looking like an idiot for a short period of time in order to achieve something greater.

It's okay to look like an idiot

Okay, so perhaps you believe me that things will get easier over time. That if you just stick through it and keep going, if you keep writing blog posts, if you keep talking on stage, or making YouTube videos, that it will eventually not feel so uncomfortable and that it may even begin to feel natural. But how do you get to that point when your hands are shaking uncontrollably and you can't even hold the mic?

Simple. You don't even care. You don't care that you might be up there looking dumb. You don't care that someone might read your blog post and think that you're completely wrong and stupid. You don't care that

someone might laugh at you, because you're ready and willing to laugh with them. Again, I know that's easy to say, but let's break it down a bit.

First, what's the worst that can happen if you end up looking like an idiot? It's not like physical harm is going to come to you because you made a fool of yourself. No matter how bad you blow it at presenting on stage, no one is really going to care that much. Sure, it might be a spectacle while you're up there blubbering away and sweat is pouring off of your forehead, but after it's over, chances are no one will even remember it.

Think about it this way. When was the last time you saw someone "biff it"? Do you even remember? Did you shout obscenities at him and boo him off the stage? Did you email him or call him on the phone as a follow-up to let him know how horrible a person he was and that he wasted your time? Of course not. So what do you have to worry about?

If you want to succeed, you have to learn how to swallow your pride and get out there and not be afraid to make a fool of yourself. Every single famous actor, musician, professional sports player, and public speaker at one time wasn't very good at what they do and had to make a conscious choice to get out there anyway and to do their best. The results will eventually come. You can't keep doing something and not get better at it; you just have to survive long enough for that to happen. The way you survive is by not caring. Don't be afraid to look like an idiot.

I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.

—Michael Jordan

Take small steps (or dive right in)

If it were up to me, I'd take you right over to the edge of the pool and give you a nice hard push right into the deep end, because I know that's the fastest way to learn. But I realize not everyone appreciates being

put in a sink-or-swim situation, so you might want to start off slowly by taking small steps.

If you're nervous about doing speaking, writing, or something else I mentioned in the previous chapters of this section, try to think of the smallest thing you can do that doesn't make you quite as nervous and start there.

A good place to start would be writing comments on other people's blogs. I realize even this task can be intimidating for some developers, but it's a good place to start, because it doesn't require you to write very much and you can contribute to a conversation instead of starting one.

Be prepared for criticism, but don't be afraid of it. It may turn out that some people don't like what you have to say or don't agree with you. So what? It's the internet, and everyone is entitled to their own opinion, so don't let it get to you. It's good to get used to a little bit of abuse, because even your most perfect work will be criticized by someone. You can never please everyone.

Once you're feeling a bit braver, write your own blog post. Write about a topic you already know about well or even write a "how-to." Don't start with an opinionated post, because those are the most likely to draw the internet trolls out of their caves to bludgeon you with their clubs. You'll probably find it isn't that bad and some people might actually like what you wrote. (Just don't let it go to your head.)

From there expand out further. Perhaps you can write a guest post for someone else's blog or you can be interviewed on a podcast. You might even join a club like Toastmasters (<http://www.toastmasters.org/>) to help you get used to speaking in public. Many people who never thought they'd be able to speak in front of a crowd go through Toastmasters and end up being excellent public speakers.

The point is to always be moving forward. It doesn't matter if you're taking little steps and slowly getting accustomed to the temperature of the water or if you jump right in and make a big splash in the deep-end. You're going to feel uncomfortable, you're likely going to be scared—possibly even terrified—but it will pass. If you keep on going and

you're willing to face those challenges head on, if you're willing to look like an idiot—for a short period of time—you'll succeed where most people fail, and I guarantee it will be worth it.

Taking action

- Get brave. Today is your day. Go out and do something that scares you. Big or small, it doesn't matter. Force yourself to be in an uncomfortable situation and remind yourself that it's no big deal.
- Now repeat the first action item at least once a week.

SOFT SKILLS

The software developer's life manual

John Z. Sonmez

For most software developers, coding is the fun part. The hard bits are dealing with clients, peers, and managers, staying productive, achieving financial security, keeping yourself in shape, and finding true love. This book is here to help.

Soft Skills: The software developer's life manual is a guide to a well-rounded, satisfying life as a technology professional. In it, developer and life coach John Sonmez offers advice to developers on important "soft" subjects like career and productivity, personal finance and investing, and even fitness and relationships.

Arranged as a collection of 71 short chapters, this fun-to-read book invites you to dip in wherever you like. A Taking Action section at the end of each chapter shows you how to get quick results. *Soft Skills* will help make you a better programmer, a more valuable employee, and a happier, healthier person.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- Boost your career by building a personal brand
- John's secret ten-step process for learning quickly
- Fitness advice to turn your geekiness to your advantage
- Unique strategies for investment and early retirement

John Sonmez is a developer, teacher, and life coach who helps technical professionals boost their careers and live a more fulfilled life.



"Useful, practical, and actionable advice on a wide array of topics."

—From the Foreword
by Scott Hanselman

"Conveys a message that every software developer (and everybody else, for that matter) ought to hear."

—From the Foreword by
Robert C. Martin (Uncle Bob)

"Stop coding for a few hours and read this book! Your code—and your life—will be much better."

—lonel Condor, SDL

"A pragmatic and holistic view of software development."

—Javier Muñoz Mellid, Igalia

"A career coach in a book."

—Heather Campbell, Kainos

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ISBN-13: 978-1617292392

ISBN-10: 1617292397

53499



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US \$34.99 | Can \$36.99